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SUBJECT: PRELIMINARY REPORT OF ODIHR LIMITED ELECTION
OBSERVATION MISSION TO CROATIA

REF: ZAGREB 1024

11. SUMMARY: The OSCE/ODIHR's Limited Election Observation Mission (LEOM) to Croatia released its interim report on November 20. All indicators point toward free and fair elections conducted in line with the established legal framework, but the report does draw particular attention to the new Law on Voter Lists and diaspora voting (reftel provides a detailed discussion of issues surrounding the diaspora vote). On 31 October 2007, for the upcoming parliamentary elections. The 20 member team, which began work in Croatia on October 31, is to assess the electoral process focusing on the election campaign, the legislative framework and its implementation, the media situation, the work of the election administration and the resolution of election-related disputes. A final report is due approximately 2 months after the completion of elections. END SUMMARY.

The Mission At a Glance

12. The LEOM includes 10 international staff based in Zagreb, along with 10 long-term observers deployed to Split, Rijeka, Osijek, Zadar and Sisak. The mission does not intend to carry out a systematic or comprehensive observation on elections day, but the observers will visit several polling stations across the country to follow procedures. In addition to their work on elections day, the LEOM has established regular contact with the GOC, the new permanent State Election Commission and lower-level election committees, as well as political parties, NGOs, academics and media outlets. On 19 November, the LEOM also visited the Croatian embassy in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, to discuss preparations for voting by the Croatian diaspora.

Law on Voter Lists and the Diaspora

13. The LEOM's preliminary report indicates the Croatian election campaign season is progressing with few issues of note. Electronic and print media are generally covering the campaign in line with established legal frameworks. Croatia looks to be set to hold free and fair elections on 25 November.

14. The LEOM has highlighted the issue of voter lists in both their preliminary report and during a meeting with the diplomatic community on 8 November. Since the 2003 elections, Croatia has worked to alleviate issues associated with its complex voter registration procedures. The 2007 Law on Voter Lists computerized the voter registration system.

This allows better coordination and cross-checking of lists, and facilitates corrections when an error is discovered. Recent statutory amendments require voters to request a change in polling station no less than 14 days prior to the election. This regulation becomes especially relevant in the discussion of diaspora voters. Diaspora voter lists are compiled based on data acquired at the time of the person's last contact with Croatian officials. Many voters have since moved or have taken up temporary residence in another city or country. Of the 286,000 voters registered in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it is estimated that as many as 110,000 may actually be working in Germany. If these voters do not pre-register their temporary residence before the elections, they may arrive at one of the Consulates in Germany and find they are unable to vote. Their name will remain on the list back in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

15. Polling stations for the diaspora have also sparked some debate. A significant increase in the number of polling stations in Bosnia-Herzegovina (an area at the heart of debates about diaspora voting) has been portrayed as strategy of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) to increase the number of diaspora representatives, who historically vote with the HDZ. As noted reftel, the HDZ is actively trying to boost diaspora voter turnout, and the number of polling stations in Bosnia-Herzegovina is set to increase from 30 in the 2003 elections, to 124 during this year's elections. The LEOM mission points out, however that even with the increase the number of registered voters in Bosnia-Herzegovina (where voter turnout is historically far lower than in Croatia) per polling station remains over 2,000. In Croatia the average is 524 people per polling station.

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